

Serious Business
1 Corinthians 11:17-34

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All is not well at the church in Corinth. They are having issues, and problems. One of them is what to do when they share the ritual meal. 'When you come together,' Paul says, 'some of you are getting drunk while others are going hungry. You are creating divisions among yourselves, and this must stop.' Instead, Paul explains, remember that this is about Christ, his body and blood shed for us. Before we eat together, we should take time to examine ourselves: our motives, hidden desires, true intent. We don't want to dishonor Jesus' sacrifice by making a mockery of this special meal.

Paul's point is if we are going to eat together it should be the way Jesus intended, in a spirit of unity and love, not division.

By and large, the church followed Paul's directions for about the next 1500 years. Along the way they worked out what they thought was happening. They decided this meal is a sacrament, a visible purveyor of God's invisible grace. By receiving communion, we are receiving God's grace.

The church also decided on something called the doctrine of Transubstantiation. During communion, they said, the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Jesus. It looks like bread and wine, but in reality it is the actual body and blood of Jesus.

As I said, things went along quite well for about 1500 years and then the Reformation happened. Suddenly, communion was even more divisive than it had been with the Corinthians.

Some of the Reformers quit believing in sacraments. They called them ordnances and are something we do because Jesus told us to. Not only that, the bread and wine don't change. They're just bread and wine. That's all. This is the common belief among Baptists, Pentecostals, Nazarenes, and others.

Others branches of Christianity adopted what we call the doctrine of Consubstantiation. That is, the bread and wine become

the spiritual body and blood of Jesus. Under a microscope they're just bread and wine. But spiritually, they are the body and blood of Jesus. This belief is common among Anglicans and Episcopalians.

Luther was torn about which way to go so he settled on a middle ground. Luther said the bread and wine themselves don't actually change. They're just bread and wine. But, he said, Christ is present in the elements the way fire is present in an ember. Christ is in, over, around and through the elements the way fire is present in an ember.

John Calvin, the father of our Reformed Theology, took communion in a different direction by emphasizing the communal aspect. He said the elements don't change. Bread and wine, that's all they are. But in the act of receiving communion together, when we come together as the Body of Christ to celebrate the sacrament, we are drawn up into heaven and celebrate together with all the saints of God. By observing communion in community, he said, we have a foretaste of what it will be like to live in the Kingdom of Heaven.

All of a sudden, then, communion was no longer a common practice with common beliefs. There's a lot of different doctrines floating around. What used to unify the Church was suddenly very divisive.

In the 1800s, American Presbyterians made it even worse by emphasizing purity. To make sure no one received the sacrament unworthily, elders would go to your home on the Saturday night before communion. They would examine you on the quality of your life, how often you prayed and read the Bible and did you know the 10 Commandments and so forth. If they approved of your answers, they would give you a small token to take to worship the next day. When you went forward to receive communion you would surrender your communion token as proof you were worthy.

If you ever visit the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, be sure and see the display of communion tokens. Some were pieces of paper, some pieces of metal, some were round, wooden tokens. Fortunately, we got away from that practice in the early 1900s.

For too long, we as Christians have missed Paul's point, and Jesus' point, about unity and love. Unity and love. What should be uniting us and helping us love each other has instead, sadly,

become an excuse for divisions. This is not the way it should be. This is not the way it has to be.

Let me tell you a story. I heard it many years ago from a pastor who was old as dirt even then, so you know this happened a long time ago. Probably the 1970s.

The pastor was officiating at a wedding and the couple had asked that communion be celebrated at the service. Sure. Not a problem. We can do that. When the time came, the Pastor said the usual words of institution and he also said, as he always did, this table is for those who have been baptized and who sincerely love the Lord. This table is for those who have been baptized and who sincerely love the Lord. Then, he invited them to come forward for communion by intinction.

He looked up and realized everyone was coming forward. Everyone, the whole church, was coming forward. Wait a minute. This isn't right. Everyone? Everyone? Should he stop the service and reiterate that bit about being baptized and loving the Lord? By then, he decided, it was too late. So, he stood back and watched as pew after pew after pew came forward to receive communion.

After the service, when everyone had left and he was locking up, a young family approached him. "Pardon us, pastor. My name is Ishmael, this is my wife Fatimah, and these are our children. We are Muslims and were unsure about coming to this wedding, but the groom has been like a brother to us, and we felt we had to come. You gave the invitation to your communion, and everyone was getting up and moving and before we realized it our children had slipped out and were standing in line with everyone else. We didn't know what to do so we jumped into line with them, and we all took your communion. If we have offended you, we are so very sorry."

The pastor assured them it wasn't a problem, no harm done, and he would see them at the reception.

A few minutes later, just as he was about to leave, an older couple came up and spoke to him. "Excuse us, pastor. My name is Yitzhak. This my wife, Sarai. We are holocaust survivors, and we long ago swore we would never enter a Christian house of worship. But this bride has been like a daughter to us and we could not, not come to her wedding. You gave the invitation to your communion and somehow, we were caught up in the moment and we joined the

line with everyone else and we took your communion. If we have offended you, we are so very sorry.”

The pastor assured them he was not offended, it was not a problem, and they all left for the reception.

The pastor said when he got to the reception it was the most peaceful and yet the most joyful reception he had ever been to. He said there was a spirit of unity and goodwill pervading the reception like none he had ever seen. There was peace, and love, in a way he had never experienced before.

What the universal church had failed to do, this single church had done. What Christians had failed to do, this gathering of Christians and non-Christians had done.

Friend, I don't know what doctrine you hold about communion. I know nothing about the purity of your life or your relationship with the Risen Christ. But I say to you, in a spirit of unity and love, this table is for you. In unity and love, this table is for you. Thanks be to God. Amen.